

*The Associated Press*

## **Do-it-yourself divorce in Vermont**

*State-mandated course enables nearly 70 percent of divorcing couples to untie the knot without a lawyer.*

*Tuesday, January 21, 2003*

MONTPELIER, Vt. - A majority of Vermonters who divorce do so without hiring an attorney.

Instead, they take a class on how to represent themselves.

The court-mandated session is for people who have filed for divorce and opted not to hire a lawyer. Nearly 70 percent of Vermonters are divorced without an attorney, according to statistics from the Court Administrator's Office.

Some are put off by the cost of a hiring a divorce lawyer, which starts at about \$1,500. Others just want to be in control of the process.

"There's not a lot of low-cost counsel available. If you've got limited resources and you think you can do it, and the court does help, then maybe this is the one thing that you forego in order to pay for something else," said Sally Fox, a former state representative who helped write the legislation to establish Family Courts and who used to be the state director of Family Court operations.

There are also risks to going it alone.

Many of the decisions that are made in front of a judge cannot be reversed later.

The state established a Family Court system in 1990. A separate court system would bring divorce and child custody cases onto the same docket as juvenile cases. The goal was to more quickly resolve cases that had to do with children, Fox said.

"Because it's a place where the needs of children will be paramount, we want it to be a place where you can get these cases resolved quickly," Fox said.

Family Court was set up as a user-friendly place and continues to add programs to streamline the process.

Although the court wasn't necessarily established to allow the majority of Vermonters to represent themselves in a divorce, that has been the effect.

Tom Garrett, executive director of Legal Services Law Line of Vermont, said he worries most about people who have reading problems, disabilities or who are so traumatized by

the divorce itself that they lack judgment in making decisions. Those people could benefit from a lawyer if they can afford one, he said.

"If people are relatively sophisticated, relatively literate and have cool judgment so they can express themselves well and listen well, they can probably handle this themselves," he said.